

Title: Against the Orcs

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Cove. A filthy port by all accounts, and this tavern seemed to be more dirty than most by an order of magnitude. A sickly crud dripped from between the planks of the roof, onto the oft-gouged half-rotted wood table I sat at, my books open under a lantern as I scribed the tales of yet another prose-poet bard with no sense of rhythm or literary artifice.

Across the way, a cantankerous and ulcer-ridden old sea dog of a man pounded his copper mug of ale into the slimy table, sending up an eruption of froth that settled into the wood.

“Half orc, she was!
Hah! But I still had something to give ta her!
More cushion for the pushin’ indeed, mates!
Can’t say that I minded all that much ‘till I had ta go an’ get an An Nox for the pox on me...”

I wanted to step in with a word on the vicious nature of the parentage of half orcs when the door burst open, cutting off the punchline, and my exposition, as a gust of hot, wet wind blew in from outside. The night immediately covered the place, as the wind blew

out the dripping, sizzling candles that were all about, and had provided an oily illumination.

I secured my feathered cap upon my head, as it allows me to see in total darkness. Panic had gripped the room. I heard a clamorous concussion as the bedraggled sea dog turned over his table and hid behind it. A tavern maid with a gap between her teeth and scars of old pox between her breasts shrieked in the darkness.

The man was dripping wet from the rain, but a sinister stream of liquid ran from his pants leg; blood, freshly wetting and profuse. It ebbed and pulsed onto the floor as the man attempted to gather himself.

“Orcs...” Then his breath exploded, not out of his mouth, but from a sudden hole in his neck as an arrow burst out from his throat! Blood sprayed the tavern and in the half-darkness I could hear the screams of the tavern-goers as they ran for the back exit, trampling one another into the ichor of the mud floor.

Picking up a butchers’ knife from the table, I ran forward and shoved the tavern wench out of my way, then grabbed her serving platter to use as a makeshift shield. Crashing through the wretched man dying in the door, I saw the orc turn and fire a single shot.

Instinctively, I threw up the serving platter, which stopped the jagged bolt mere inches from my face. I kept running as the beast rounded the moulded, mildew-infested stone chimeney of a local farmer. Everything was still, for a moment, all I could hear was the rising rabble of the local guards, and a few panicked chickens.

I hauled towards the chickens at a cautious pace, and before I rounded the corner, I threw one around the way.

There was a squawk and a puff of feathers and I knew I would be buying some tobacco-soaked half-drunk farmer a new chicken. I then made the corner, and ran hard into the orc scout. He was wearing pitiful armor that did not protect his underarms.

I drew the blade quickly underneath one shoulder, then the other, before gouging the knife across his pectorals, preventing him from using the bow again.

The orc fled, a behavior I had never before seen in orcs - unless a dragon was chasing them. I was no dragon, but I sprinted towards him when I heard him utter guttural orcish-tinged versions of arcane syllables - rel por!

He was teleported thirty or so feet away, to the top of a roof. It did not hold. The slimy, mold-encrusted straw gave way and he fell right

through.

I ran around to the front of the stone and wood shack, eaten through with termites. The door swung open and a screaming, naked hairy man came running out.

I jumped in. A lantern had spilled a burning oil onto the mud floor and a shattered, stinking table was catching flame.

Amongst them, there was the orc scout, pulling tight a bandage with his teeth, sealing the seeping wounds that I had delivered with a clever over-and-under wrap.

Never before had I known orcs to retreat, bandage themselves, or use any sort of clever tactical maneuver. That conceit was going right out of the window, however.

The orc likely would have followed the conceit, but there were no windows. I stepped forward and stabbed a few times as the poor fiend attempted to run away, right into the back.

It fell, dead on the ground, clutching an odd bow. I picked it up, examined the insidious arrowhead. The bow was made for a strong man, no doubt, but I could handle it, no problem. I drew it back, the craftsmanship was quite nice for an orcish weapon.

I felt odd. Confused, dazed - a magical effect. Then my limbs wanted to be paralyzed, magic soaked through my being,

but years spent being a test subject for mages who shared my madness for knowledge have left me half immune to all but the most powerful of magics.

An orc mage! In the street! I drew the arrow back and released it, it slung forward and embedded deep into the shoulder.

I drew, launched another arrow, and this one found a better target - the heart of the mage. The glowing body fell down onto the ground, self-incinerating in a matter of seconds.

By now, a few guardsmen had shown up, in time to catch me bandaging a minor wound I had suffered, and casting an ‘an nox’ in case I’d caught anything from touching the orcs or the townsfolk.

I headed for the decrepit tower that housed the town guard.

“Well, you see, Mr... Granth.” The guard captain sighed. He was standing in front of a reeking peat fire that gave off a smoke which was acrid, bitter, and smelled like burning flesh.

“...we’re under attack by pirates. We do get a few orcs, yes, from the fort in the west. They cannot attack us en masse, nor can we do the same, except by sea, due to the narrow passageway between the cliffs and the sea. Therefore, we

deal with the pirates, Mr. Granth. If you've got a ship, I could loan you the money to hire a few adventurers, and I'd let you get my best guardsman on the case. I'll admit, they've never used archers or mages here in town."

I was ready. As a man who knew the ins and outs of orcish culture, I knew that this was the beginning of an orcish blood war. Someone had wronged an orc lord. This was no raid, no mere assassination or incursion.

War would come, alright. And I hated to bring it to the orcs. The reason that I could understand their plight was because I had lived amongst them, heard their tales, fought elves and men and murdered my own kind.

It made me all the more ready to fight.

I had a boat. The fastest boat in Britannia.

The Codex Mathematica.
TO BE CONTINUED